

## **Formations of Erasure: Earthworks and Entropy**


A project by the Center for Land Use Interpretation

April 25 - June 2, 2001

Formations of Erasure: Earthworks and Entropy is a contemporary photographic display about the interaction of earthworks with the sculpting forces of erosion. Earthwork (sometimes called Land Art) sites are places where the earth itself is used as a medium for artistic expression, where artists have used soil, rock, or other terrestrial materials, sometimes on a large scale, to create pieces that explore cultural or formal issues relating to the landscape. This exhibit features a selection of earthworks, represented in large color photographic prints (all recent additions to the Center for Land Use Interpretation Photographic Archive), where the earthworks have been transformed by natural and human erosion to become a new kind of landform - a formation that blends the intentionality of the artist's hand with the subsequent "entropic" forces of decay.

The following sites are represented in contemporary photos taken by the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), accompanied by interpretive text panels also written by CLUI:

1. Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah
2. Robert Smithson, Amarillo Ramp, completed after Smithson's death in 1973 by Nancy Holt and Richard Serra, Amarillo, Texas
3. Robert Smithson, Partially Buried Woodshed, 1970, Kent State University, Ohio
4. Nancy Holt, Star-Crossed, 1979, Miami University, Ohio
5. Michael Heizer, the site of Rift 1, a part of his Nine Nevada Depressions, 1968, Jean Dry Lake, Nevada
6. Michael Heizer, Double Negative, 1969-1970, Mormon Mesa, Nevada
7. Michael Heizer, Effigy Tumuli, 1983-1985, Buffalo Rocks State Park, Illinois
8. William Bennett, Jamesville Quarry, 1976-1986, Jamesville, New York
9. James Pierce, Pratt Farm, 1970-1982, Clinton Maine
10. Various artists, Art Park, 1974-, on the Niagara River, near Lewiston, New York. Numerous artists, including Alice Aycock, Alan Sonfist, and Dennis Oppenheim, used this site. Nancy Holt and Laurie Anderson also worked on sites in this 200-acre park. Text caption: INVISIBLE EARTHWORKS



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Additional text panels:

Introduction text (sent as attachment)

WHAT IS AN EARTHWORK? (2 panels, sent in hard copy)

About the Center for Land Use Interpretation

The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) is a nonprofit organization involved in land and landscape issues. The Center employs a multimedia and multidisciplinary approach to increase and diffuse knowledge about how the world's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived. Photo-documentary projects, guidebooks, publications, bus tours, and site-specific installations are some of the techniques employed by the CLUI. The Center is supported by grants from public sources and private foundations, as well as donations from individuals and by the proceeds from the sale of publications.

For more information on CLUI see their website: [www.clui.org](http://www.clui.org)

This exhibition was originated by the Center for Land Use Interpretation, and shown in their gallery, in Los Angeles, September 15 - November 18th, 2000.



## Introduction text, by the Center for Land Use Interpretation

Earthworks, sculptures made on and with the land, represent a lasting dialogue between the earth and the artist. In some cases, the discussion continues long after the artist has left, reverberating in popular journals and scholarly mediums. But this dialogue also continues, undernoticed, out in the field, where the physical form continues to interact with the environment. Paying attention to this aspect of the conversation, we can learn something more about the meaning these creations may harbor.

In the landscape, entropy transforms the potential energy stored in built forms into the kinetic energy of erosion. When a hole is dug or a pile mounded, erosion is active in the process as well, and when an earthwork is complete, erosion takes over, modifying the form according to its laws, using gravity, water and wind. Over time, the structure recedes from the pure, intentional form of the artist's idea, into a new state that cannot be created solely by human hands, a dynamic form that represents a collaboration between humans and the nonhuman world.

But erosional decay cannot be described simply as a *force of nature*, and it does not necessarily exist in opposition to human endeavor. Decay is a condition of life that begins at birth. If the creation of an earthwork is compared to an act of birth, the life of the piece is played out after the artist has left, by its long journey into physical nonexistence, and beyond memory.

For even when no traces of the earthwork remain visible at the site, the earthwork remains. Its image, burned into innumerable publications, renewed and circulating endlessly, is, to many people, the only evidence that exists at all. But the life of an earthwork takes place outside the frame, in the landscape, for all to see, part of the common vocabulary of American landforms.







Some of the most monumental “earthworks” are still under construction (and therefore have not yet begun to decay), such as *Star Axis*, a sculpture/observatory carved into a hillside in New Mexico, which was started in the 1970’s by Charles Ross. Also in this category are *Roden Crater*, James Turrell’s piece in Arizona, and *Complex City*, Michael Heizer’s mile-long sculpture in Nevada.



Of the countless fixed, outdoor sculptures done for campuses, office parks, public parks and private collections, many have elements of an “earthwork,” but ultimately depend too much on concrete or other non-native construction materials to fully be defined as such. Examples include Beverly Pepper’s 1974 piece *Amphisculpture*, at AT&T’s national control center in New Jersey (pictured); Nancy Holt’s 1976 Utah piece *Sun Tunnels*, and Walter De Maria’s *Lightning Field*. These fall more squarely in the “land art” category.



Many earthworks in the country were examined for this exhibit, but are not shown here because they are maintained (for the time being), held in stasis by vigilant grounds keepers who keep the entropic forces at bay. Pictured above is one such case, Herbert Bayer’s *Earth Mound*, located at the Aspen Institute in Colorado. This piece was done in 1955, predating the pioneering earthworks of Michael Heizer by a dozen years. Herbert Bayer has made other earthworks which are also well-maintained, such as *Mill Creek Canyon Park*, in Washington State, which is near the similarly well-tended *Johnson Gravel Pit* piece by Robert Morris. Other earthworks which are well-maintained include Maya Lin’s *Wave Field*, in a courtyard at the University of Michigan, and Richard Fleischner’s *Sod Maze*, on the lawn of a mansion in Newport, Rhode Island. These pieces are suspended in an uneroded state and, like the earthworks still under construction, we will have to return to them, at least in the context of this exhibit, after they have been released into the *outside world*.



# WHAT IS AN EARTHWORK?

Terminology and definitions of this genre vary, but generally an earthwork is considered to be a sculpture made outdoors, integrating existing elements of the site into the form of the sculpture. However, unlike the broader category of “land art” or “earth art,” which includes outdoor art that may be transient, temporary, or conceptual, earthworks tend to be fixed in place, and use earthen material, such as stone, gravel, or soil, as the primary sculptural material. Another type of land art, called “environmental art” by some, includes a broader range of material, such as water and flora, and explores earth processes with a more systematic or ecological approach. Earthworks may be further defined by including only works that primarily use material that is native to the site, and not imported material such as paints, lumber, and concrete. This is the definition used to select sites for this exhibit.



## Landscape architecture, land art, or earthwork?

The *Grand Rapids Project*, made by Robert Morris in 1974, is a piece that illustrates the margins of such - at times seemingly arbitrary - definitions. The piece was built on an eroded hillside in a city park near downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. Construction involved recontouring the hill and adding paths, one ringing the top of the hill (around a huge, concealed water tank), and another set of paths along the graded face of the hill, which meet in the middle forming a visible 'X' on the hillside. Erosion was controlled by a drainage system, with buried pipes. To some degree this piece is a civil works project, where a slope was stabilized, protecting recreational areas below and a storage tank essential to the city's water supply at the top. It is also landscape architecture, as the site has many of the functional and esthetic elements of a park. It is also like an earthwork, as it is made mostly of shaped earth, and, perhaps more significantly, because it was made by an established artist who has made other earthworks.





# SPIRAL JETTY

The *Spiral Jetty* is a basalt spiral 1500 feet long, and 15 feet wide, which protrudes from the shore of the Great Salt Lake, on submerged land leased from the government. Given his preoccupation with entropy, it is fitting that each of the three existing earthworks designed by Smithson in the United States are severely degraded, and each in a different way. The *Spiral Jetty* is usually invisible, lying a few feet under the fluctuating surface level of the lake. Smithson built the piece in 1970 at a time when the lake was at a particularly low level. The Dia Foundation of New York, which acquired the piece from Smithson's estate in 1999, has pledged to make the site more accessible, and may even be considering adding rocks to make it visible more often (Smithson said he would raise the level 15 feet if it became submerged). For the present, the piece only occasionally rises to the levels of perceptibility, within the visual conundrum that is the Great Salt Lake.



A mile down the shore from the Spiral Jetty is another jetty, once used for an oil pumping operation. The site is littered with debris, and Smithson was inspired by it, saying "The mere sight of the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory. The products of a Devonian industry, the remains of a Silurian technology, all the machines of the Upper Carboniferous Period were lost in those expansive deposits of sand and mud."





# AMARILLO RAMP

While *Spiral Jetty* is submerged, Smithson's other spiral earthwork, *Amarillo Ramp*, is now high and dry. It was originally built in a shallow, artificial irrigation pond which was drained by the property owners a few years after the construction of the ramp. The earthwork consists of a 398 foot long mound in the shape of  $\frac{4}{5}$ ths of a circle, which rises from ground level to approximately 12 feet in height. No efforts to preserve the structure have been made, and the piece is changing slowly by erosion due to water and wind, by the footsteps of the occasional visitor, and cattle. Robert Smithson died in a plane crash while surveying the site in 1973, along with the pilot and a photographer (the crash site is just a few hundred yards from the ramp). The piece was finished by his widow Nancy Holt, and Richard Serra. It was commissioned by Stanley Marsh, who owns over 200 square miles of ranch land around Amarillo, on which he has had several other sculptures built, including the *Cadillac Ranch*.





The ramp is coated in a shaggy hide of brush, though the general  
the piece is very much intact.





## PARTIALLY BURIED WOODSHED

Robert Smithson conceived and executed this piece while he was staying at Kent State University for a week as a visiting artist in January, 1970. It was too cold for the “mud pour” work he had expected to perform, so this substitute was hastily developed by Smithson and some of the students. Intended as an illustration of entropy, dirt was dumped on an empty shed by a backhoe until the center beam of the wood and stucco structure cracked. Before he left the campus, the piece was officially transferred to the University and valued at \$10,000, and Smithson said that he expected the piece to just “go back to the land.” But many unforeseen events conspired to alter the piece physically and contextually. After Smithson’s death in 1973, his widow, Nancy Holt, lobbied to have the shed’s remains preserved, but in 1975 it was partially burned by arsonists. Despite their obligations to preserve the piece, University officials considered the remains an eyesore, and over the next decade grounds keepers removed all of the pieces that fell to the ground. By 1984, all that was left was the mound itself (pictured above) and some portions of the foundation.



A few months after the piece was “built” the famous Kent State shoot occurred (where students protesting the Vietnam War were killed by National Guardsmen), and soon afterwards someone commemorated the event by painting “May 4 Kent 70” on the woodshed. The lettering, visible from the road and remaining on the shed for years, linked the shed and the “breach point” of the beam, to the cultural shift that many consider the Kent State shootings to represent. Today the remains are hidden in a grove of trees, many of which were planted some time ago to obscure the ruin. The grove is surrounded by the new Liquid Crystal Materials Science building, a football field, and a parking lot.







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# STAR-CROSSED

In 1979, Nancy Holt was commissioned to do two works on the grounds of Miami University in Ohio, a piece called *Polar Circle*, and this piece called *Star-Crossed*. *Polar Circle* was destroyed not long afterwards, apparently by accident, by the University grounds crew. *Star-Crossed* has survived, but is in a degraded state, and is officially closed (as a sign next to the sculpture indicates). The piece is made primarily of earth, originally mounded to a height of 14 feet, covering two concrete tubes, one aligned north-south and the other east-west, held in place by a buried steel frame. Until recently, the grounds crew of the University has been attempting to maintain it as part of the landscaping of the property, and it has not been treated as an artwork with special conservatorial needs. Some years ago, due to insufficient irrigation, the grass covering died, and the soil, thus exposed to erosion, slowly slumped down the steep slopes. The sculpture was rebuilt, but with the existing clay subsoil mixed into the topsoil, making for a less resilient form. Efforts to preserve the piece are said to be moving forward, under a new director at the art museum.



The higher end of the north-south tunnel has a path leading to it up the side of the mound, and visitors were encouraged to look through the tube to the oval pool, which appears as a circle when viewed through the tunnel. The pool, now empty, was meant to reflect the sky, so while you are looking down, you are seeing up.



Located behind the art museum on campus, *Star-Crossed* is a few feet shorter than the original height of 14 feet. The base is wider, and the top is sharper. While attempts to revegetate the sculpture with the original grasses failed, there are hopes that a recent "hydroseeding" - the application of a green slurry spray of fertilizer and seed that highway departments use on medians - may have been successful.





## JEAN DRY LAKE

Desert dry lakes are the most *entropically evolved* of landforms. They are composed of the constituents of the melted landscapes that surround them, mixed into a stratified mud, pressed flat by gravity. Like a skin that heals itself, runoff moistens the mud so that disturbances to their surface become erased over the years. Jean Dry Lake (pictured above), south of Las Vegas, has thus totally absorbed Michael Heizer's *Rift 1*, a zig-zag trench dug into the lake surface in 1968, as part of his *Nine Nevada Depressions*. This series of pieces was located primarily on dry lakes throughout the state, comprising a "520 mile earthwork." Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim and Walter De Maria sometimes travelled together during 1968 and 1969, creating temporary works in the desert and on other dry lakes (Massacre and Black Rock, in Nevada, and especially Coyote and El Mirage in California). All traces of these works seem to have disappeared, and we are left only with the lingering images of them, filling the pages of land art books. Appropriately, in this age of *virtuality* and *image*, these same dry lakes are favored locations for the image production industries of advertising and television. Like the earthworks artists, they know that work set on dry lakes - these *terminal* landscapes - make images that linger in the mind, long after they are gone.





# DOUBLE NEGATIVE

An earthwork created by the artist Michael Heizer from 1969 to 1970, the piece consists of two gouges in the edge of a mesa in southern Nevada. The 30 foot wide, 50 foot deep cuts, made by dynamite and bulldozers, face each other from either side of a “scallop” on the eroded edge of the natural landform, suggesting a continuous, invisible, negative form between them. The piece, totaling almost 1,500 feet from end to end (including the space between), is now property of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. To date, no efforts have been made to preserve this site, and the walls of the man-made canyon are crumbling, due to weathering and human visitation, as the piece’s location, though remote, is well known, and usually accessible by car. Heizer has made comments about wanting to encase the eroding walls in concrete to arrest the decay, and other improvements are under discussion. Meanwhile, he continues to work on *Complex City* at a location 125 miles north of *Double Negative*, which, when it is complete, will probably be the largest sculpture in the world.



Rubble from the walls of the artificial canyon is collapsing into the sculpture, threatening to positively fill the “negative” space.





# EFFIGY TUMULI

The *Effigy Tumuli* earthwork consists of five geometrically abstracted animal forms, created on old mining land along the Illinois River. Now a state park, the sculpture is in flux, parts eroding, parts overgrown, others nearly bare. It is one of the largest artworks in the country, and the shapes are so large that they can only be discerned from the air. On the ground, one experiences mounded earth, paths, interpretive signs, drainage control gullies, and patches of grass, shrubbery and exposed earth. Michael Heizer was commissioned to make the sculpture in 1983, by the president of the Ottawa Silica Company, who had an interest in art and whose company owned the site. The property had been strip mined for coal, and was a polluted and eroded barren landscape, with highly acidic soil. For this “reclamation art” project, instead of drawing on his vocabulary of abstract forms, Heizer used figurative forms, creating mounds shaped like animals native to the region. There is a snake, catfish, turtle, frog, and a water strider (the legs of which can be seen in the photograph above). He considered these figures to be evocative of the Indian mounds that can be found throughout the midwest, and intended his sculpture to be a statement for the Native Americans.



A trail wanders through the 1.5 mile long site, and interpretive signs, each with a map of the site, help to give visitors a sense of what they might be looking at. Heizer seemed pleased that the forms were imperceptible from the ground, saying the piece “requires a chronological development of perception.”



A drainage infrastructure at the site, with corrugated pipes and coarse rock gullies, helps route water around the earthworks. A plastic/organic material called Excelsior Netting covers each of the sculptures, in an attempt to promote growth of the dozen or so different types of seeds spread over the grounds.





# JAMESVILLE QUARRY

Located in an unused corner of the massive Jamesville Quarry in upstate New York, this piece was never completed, and has been untouched since 1986. The environment surrounding the piece resembles the erosional canyons of the Southwest in form and scale, but was made instead by human hands and machines, removing the beds of limestone to make cement and aggregate. The intervening years have hardly altered the piece, as human erosion has been virtually non-existent in the restricted-access quarry. Much of the displaced rock on the fringes of the wedge-shaped sculpture is just where it was left when the last stone was moved by William Bennett, the artist who began work on it in 1976. Work slowed to occasional summer visits starting in 1979, when Bennett moved away from the area. He hopes to return to work on the piece in the future, but no longer plans to make the large *inverted pyramid* form, which was originally intended as the target for the alignment of the existing “wedge.”







Visitors were meant to walk into the piece starting at the shallow end, following the eight inch wide path (the “keel” of the wedge), for eighty or so feet to the end, at which point the visitor would be six feet under the surface level, facing a stone wall. Turning around to exit, the viewer looks straight down the wedge, outward at a distant target, like a gunsight.



A kind of optical instrument, the sculpture looks both inward, into the rock, and outward, into the space of the quarry; a microscope on one end and telescope on the other.





# PRATT FARM

*Pratt Farm* is a private park with numerous sculpted forms composed primarily of mounded earth and arranged rocks, all of which are overgrown and disintegrating. Around 20 distinct pieces were constructed on the 17 acre property by James Pierce, an art historian and photographer (now retired), who created them during the summers between 1970 and 1982. He calls the site a “garden of history,” and the subjects referenced in the forms range from prehistoric, such as tombs and burial mounds, to more recent historical representations, including a piece called *Quebec Expedition*, depicting Benedict Arnold’s ship in an earthen outline (the ship sailed past the site on the Kennebec River in 1775, on its way to the siege of Quebec). The large *Earthwoman* sculpture, pictured above, was inspired by the famous “Venus of Willendorf,” a small prehistoric carving of a woman, which is estimated to be 30,000 years old. Perhaps due to the ancient themes and mythic forms at *Pratt Farm*, local folklore has recently formed about the place, with stories of satanic rituals performed there. Campsites and beer cans can be found in the wooded fringe, and the more fragile balanced stone and wood pieces have long since been destroyed. Mr. Pierce still owns the property, and it is occasionally, but only partially, mowed. He lives some distance away and rarely visits it now, and expects to sell the property in the future.



Depending on the season, the general shape of the *Turf Maze* is sometimes visible. The triangular labyrinth form was constructed between 1972 and 1974 and is 120 feet long on each side, made by cutting one foot deep ruts in the earth. It is based on the plan of a 17th Century topiary maze.



The *Janus* is one of the more distinct forms remaining at Pratt Farm. A small pyramid with piercings at the top, the *Janus* is, like many of the shapes at site, a reference to ancient military fortifications.





# INVISIBLE EARTHWORKS

There are numerous sites where earthworks are now invisible, having been fully transformed into entropic monuments. The grounds of Art Park, an important development site for emerging earth artists of the 1970's, harbors many examples. Located on reclaimed land next to the Niagara River, near Lewiston, New York, the 200 acre state park had a well supported artist-in-residence program that began in 1974. The program was initiated a year after Smithson's death by one of his longtime friends and supporters, and it was with his spirit in mind that this outdoor art program on former industrial land was conceived. While some artists like Nancy Holt and Laurie Anderson preferred to work closer to the dramatic landscape of the gorge at the south end of the property, the plateau area (pictured above) was used by numerous artists, including Alice Aycock, Alan Boust, and Dennis Oppenheim. The surface of the plateau, a former industrial spoils pile, was created as a sort of land art project itself, filled in by Helen and Newton Harrison as part of their "Art Park Spoils Pile Reclamation" project. Most works were temporary, however, and the plateau is studded with the vestiges of removed and filled in artworks: bits of concrete, cable, rebar, and crushed stone, a veritable land art *proving ground*.

